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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: LIFE ON THE STEPPE, APRIL 4-10

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¶1. This is another in a series of weekly cables drawn mostly from public media, as well as think-tank, NGO, and opposition web-sites, selected to show the diversity of life in Kazakhstan, and information about it available to citizens of Kazakhstan. Our goal is to choose what might interest and be of use to various end-users in Washington and -- especially -- to provide a more complex view from the other side of the world, illustrating the vitality (and sometimes the quirkiness) of discourse available to citizens of Kazakhstan.

PRESIDENT CALLS FOR HUMMER BAN IN DOWNTOWN ALMATY

¶2. During an official visit to Almaty this week, President Nazarbayev called for better environmental preservation, singling out the city's cars as the main cause of Almaty's notorious pollution. According to the Almaty Akimat (mayor's office), there are approximately 1.5 million cars registered in the city and an additional 200,000 drive into city every day from its outskirts. Cars are reportedly responsible for 80 percent of Almaty's air pollution. One reason is that many cars on Almaty streets are old ones imported from Europe which do not comply with strict, existing European environmental standards. "Around the world, cities like Almaty do not permit the importation of old cars. (Car importers) keep bringing into the country cars which would have long been considered junk in Europe," Nazarbayev said.

¶3. In his critical remarks, Nazarbayev also did not spare the very rich -- those who actually can afford to buy new, fuel-efficient cars. "People (elsewhere) are switching to smaller cars to consume less fuel... whereas our people continue to drive around in huge cars, in Hummers. They've just lost all shame. We must stop this," he said. Nazarbayev called on the Almaty Akim (Mayor) Akhmetzhan Yesimov to ban Hummers from driving into the city center. Nazarbayev also did not appreciate lack of cleanliness of Almaty's vehicles. "As I drove around the city, I saw that every other car was dirty. Cars are supposed to be clean; something needs to be done about it," Nazarbayev remarked.

AND NOW LET'S DRINK TO EDUCATION

¶4. The Procurator's Office of the Zhezkazgan region has shed light on the dire state of education in central Kazakhstan. In a probe of

local schools, procurators found that a number of teachers were frequent guests at local detoxification centers and often conducted classes under the influence of alcohol. These infractions were among the many that officials uncovered in several schools in Zhezkazgan. Teachers falsified records about student performance and attendance, schools frequently violated health standards, and a corrupt school board promoted teachers based on family ties rather than qualifications. "When the teachers themselves frequently end up in detoxification centers and violate the law inside classrooms, they set quite an example," said Aitkazy Nurseitov, Zhezkazgan's deputy procurator.

LET'S TAKE THE ARMORED CAR TO COURT

15. The Turksib Afghanistan War Veterans Association was founded in 1987, and that same year the government gave it a plot of land which they used to build a community center. "However, several years ago the former chairman of our association fraudulently and with the help of local officials sold the property which belonged to all of us," said Oran Balmoidanov, one of the veterans. The veterans turned to the courts to reclaim their property.

16. Several years later, however, amid accusations that the court is intentionally dragging its feet, the "Afghans" are growing increasingly restless. In March, when the court once again postponed the trial of their case, the veterans organized an impromptu demonstration holding up signs calling on the population to fight corruption. At the most recent court hearing, which was scheduled for April 7, the veterans prepared another publicity stunt to bring attention to their case. This time, they decided to drive to court in a retired military armored vehicle owned by one of the veterans, in order to remind the public of their service in Afghanistan and their sacrifices. Needless to say, the police stopped the armored car before it reached the court, ostensibly because a military vehicle is not allowed to use public roads. The veterans, who claimed that the armored car is dutifully registered

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with the police and has a valid license plate, reached the court later using more conventional means. Once again, however, to their disappointment but to no surprise, they found that their case had been postponed.

OFFICIALS' WIVES EMBEZZLE FUNDS, STAGE ROBBERY TO COVER TRACKS

17. Neither a judge at the Bayanaul district court nor an official at the local Procurator's Office official had any idea how their wives came into possession of several diamond rings, 2.5 million tenge (approximately \$16,700) in cash and a new Lexus SUV (owned by the judge's wife). If they did, it would likely have had severe professional repercussions. As it turned out, their wives, employees of a local branch of Alliance Bank, embezzled millions of tenge from the bank and staged a robbery to cover up their tracks. Police responded to an alleged robbery at the bank in February, when several employees claimed that two masked criminals stole 13 million tenge. However, a subsequent investigation showed the robbery was, in fact, fictional, and three of the bank's employees -- "witnesses" to the "robbery" -- admitted staging it. For almost a year, the three had forged documents to withdraw money from a client's account. Subsequently, they staged the robbery to prevent a planned audit from finding out about their side activity. The three criminals, including the wives of the judge and the Procurator's Office official, were arrested. The trusting husbands, apparently ignorant of their wives illegal schemes, continue to uphold law and order in Bayanaul.

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